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Father, Don't You See I'm Dreaming?: The Female Gothic and the Creative Process

Diane Long Hoeveler

I

In the course of reading and teaching literature for many years, I have been impressed with the ways that literary works attempt to disguise the fact that they are often coded personal sagas, *angst*-filled daydreams committed to paper and shared with the reading public. Obviously, literary works are also ideological statements, historical documents, and aesthetic productions, but they still remain in essence the work of individual human beings, all of whom have a personal history, a childhood, parents, and loved ones who have supported or betrayed them, or most likely some combination of the two. And yet critics are hesitant to discuss, let alone analyze, the personal content in literary works, while authors are often all too quick to conceal, obfuscate, and deny any autobiographical materials in their works. Some artists over the years, however, have spoken sensitively about these matters, and I cite a very few here to frame this essay. The first is Richard Wright, the African American novelist who in his essay "On Literature" observed: "all writing is a secret form of autobiography." The second example is an observation by the early twentieth-century artist Georges Braque, who noted: "Art is a wound turned to light." And the third statement is from D. H. Lawrence, who noted that "one sheds one's sicknesses in books—repeats and presents again one's emotions, to be master of them."¹ Mastering trauma through artistic production, transforming the wounds of life by converting them into recognizable fantasies, these gestures would appear to form the core of writing as well as reading visual and verbal creativity.

The first question that this volume attempts to address, then, is how does one approach creativity as a manifestation of an artist's individual's psyche? As the Introduction notes, Freud

considered creativity to be an adult extension of imaginative play, but he also talks at length about how fantasy is deeply interwoven with trauma. A sort of equation begins to emerge here: if creativity is psychic play, perhaps that psychic play is most like what we recognize as fantasy, and if fantasy is a response to trauma, then literature is written by individuals who have turned their traumas into the fantasies that we recognize as “art.” Jonathan Culler makes a similar point when he discusses the nature of Freudian narratives: “One may maintain the primacy of the event; it took place at the appropriate moment and determined subsequent events and their significance. Or one can maintain that the structures of signification, the discursive requirements, work to produce a fictional event. At this point Freud admits the contradiction between these two perspectives, but refuses to choose between them.”² What that last quotation attempts to get at is the chicken and egg question of what comes first: trauma or fantasy. For Freud, either neurosis sprang from unconscious fantasies produced by conflicting internal and infantile sexual instincts or neurosis was the product of traumas, that is, outside intrusions on the psyche in the form of child abuse or seduction. Freud never decided conclusively between these two theories, and I would admit that I have been dwelling and oscillating on the issue as it manifests itself in female gothic fiction. This essay will examine two important female gothic novels and ask if they reveal to us how we can understand creativity as a manifestation of trauma or fantasy or finally some combination of both.

I would like to begin by presenting an abbreviated summary of the much more complex thesis of Elizabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, a work that speaks to the concerns of the female gothic in a number of interesting ways. Bronfen’s major claim is that psychoanalysis has consistently attempted to foreground the role and importance of the father in the construction of the ego because of an unacknowledged need to root out, displace, and marginalize the mother. But the displacement of the mother from both Freud’s and Lacan’s

accounts of ego formation actually serves to simultaneously aestheticize the woman's body as an object of death at the same time it charges that body with intense and diffuse anxiety. And strange as it may seem, the same sort of *fort-da* game described by Freud in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" is played out repetitiously in the female gothic novel. As a feminist revision of Freud, Bronfen attempts to move the emphasis away from Freud's construction of the uncanny female body and instead toward an analysis of his (and society's) misogynistic assumptions. For Bronfen, the uncanny "always entails anxieties about fragmentation, about the disruption or destruction of any narcissistically informed sense of personal stability, bodily integrity, immortal individuality" (113).

In the grip of the power of the uncanny, the female gothic author keeps disposing of the mother, only to reel her (usually dead) body magically back into the text for obsessive view over and over again, revealing that in both the psychoanalytic and the female gothic traditions the same wound, the same psychic trauma is being fingered. That wound consists, I think, in the loss of the matriarchy, the loss of the mother as a figure of power or even a fantasy of power in a society that no longer values her role and importance. The syndrome that I am describing here is similar, in fact, to what Lawrence Kirmayer calls the "landscapes of memory, the metaphoric terrain that shapes the distance and effort required to remember affectively charged and socially defined events that initially may be vague, impressionistic, or simply absent from memory."³

The memory of the mother's power may be dim, but female writers vaguely recall it, if only in distorted recollections of their childhoods. The "landscape of memory," however, also emerges when literary texts by women use dreams as coded, heavily freighted representations of actions that cannot occur on the explicit surface of a text. The gaps in the narrative that we can observe in so many women's novels can be explained partly by recognizing that women writers use silence,

partial conversations, or elliptical discourse to convey or merely hint at a trauma that the text can only circle warily. The sons of psychoanalysis and the daughters of the female gothic both mourn the passing of the mother's body from view and control, and so they repetitiously delineate texts that symbolize their fantasized construction and reconstruction of the maternal, aesthetically potent and deadly beautiful body. Somehow these two movements—psychoanalysis and the female gothic—both participate in some profoundly similar manner in delineating an aesthetics of loss that occurs in the private theatre of the wounded psyche. And they both find themselves spiralling into and around each other in yet another attempt to salvage the mother's body and by extension her control and power over society.

II

But let me turn now to an examination of Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* and then theorize about the role of trauma, fantasies, and dreams in Radcliffe's textual terrain.⁴ The heroine of this novel, Adeline, is not merely dispossessed like most female gothic heroines; she is literally passed from man to man in this novel as just so much excess and inconvenient baggage. When the novel opens she is being handed by one hired ruffian into the confused and baffled hands of a fleeing criminal, M. La Motte, who takes her with him and his wife to a deserted abbey in the forest. Later La Motte hands her to the Marquis de Montalt, the owner of the abbey, who also coincidentally happens to be Adeline's uncle, the murderer of her father, and the usurper of the estate she rightfully should possess. Alternately she is protected by one Theodore Peyrou, the romantic love interest and therefore the frequent target of stray swords from various "father"-figures throughout the text. The names and identities of all of these other men are less significant than the fact that Adeline exists in this text as a fetish of femininity, an exchange commodity passed between powerful men who use her as a pawn in their own vaguely homosocial schemes. These schemes, of

course, involve unpleasant activities like fratricide, theft, blackmail, and the usual unsavory and unsubtle ploys that men use to gain wealth and status in this male-dominated society.

The first and most important characteristic of Adeline as gothic heroine, however, is the fact that her parentage is a source of sorrow for her. She believes that her mother died when she was seven years old, leaving her to be raised in a convent. At the age of eighteen her father, a heartless tyrant, demands that she become a nun. When she objects, her father “denounced vengeance on [her] head if [she] persisted in disobedience” (I, 80). We are here in the terrain of terror at leaving the father, even if, as in this case, it is merely the idea of a bad father she finds herself forced to renounce. Adeline wants nothing more than to be a dutiful daughter, but she is instead compelled reluctantly and unwillingly into the role of female gothic heroine adventurer, and so the novel can begin in earnest. Adeline, like Julia, the heroine of Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance* before her, plays the part of the oedipal detective, uncoding the saga of this dysfunctional family romance, and once again proving that masculine hubris, greed, and ambition are no match for feminine “genius.”

Using Adeline’s dreams as clues to the murder mystery she must solve stands as perhaps the most original innovation Radcliffe develops in this work. Dreams have long functioned in literature as privileged sites of meaning, transactions wherein highly charged signifiers intersect with highly ambiguous signifieds. Adeline’s dreams are a treasure trove of adolescent anxiety. Listen to her narration of the first one:

I thought that I was in a lonely forest with my father; his looks were severe, and his gestures menacing: he upbraided me for leaving the convent, and while he spoke, drew from his pocket a mirror, which he held before my face; I looked in it and saw (my blood thrills as I repeat it), I saw myself wounded and bleeding profusely. Then I thought myself in the house again; and suddenly heard these

words, in accents so distinct, that for some time after I awoke I could scarcely believe them ideal,—‘Depart this house, destruction hovers here.’ (I, 90)

The images here are classic set pieces: the false father holding up the mirror to his daughter, the daughter wounded, beaten, and bloody. Anxiety and blatant fear of menstruation are imaged here in ways that the author herself seems not to recognize. The house that holds “destruction” can be read most obviously as the heroine's own body, changing without her willful consent, a transformation that is instigated in some malicious and threatening manner by the father himself. But the dream can also on some level be read as a seduction scene, with the father initiating the daughter into the bloody terrain of her own deflowered body. When Adeline bleeds she positions herself as the victim of a quasi-castration, a mutilation at the father's hands. The dream on some level asks, why have I been wounded?, while it seems we would not be overreading to imagine that Adeline is actually asking herself: how can I cut/castrate my father and not be blamed for the act?

Very shortly, however, we are told that the heroine finds herself in her chamber with a “locked door” (I, 91), and that men are coming in through this very door. At first we think Adeline is dreaming, then men actually do appear and kidnap her, only to deliver her once again into the hands of M. La Motte. Locked doors on the heroine's bedchamber loom large in gothic novels, and they would appear to be almost too comical to take seriously. Were it not for their persistent presence, that is, we might be tempted to merely dismiss the locked doors as blatant tropes for a dread of genital sexuality. But throughout these novels the daughter locks the door not simply on her own sexuality, but on her parents'. The gothic heroine seeks not simply to reject motherhood itself, but to obliterate all mothers, all fathers, all families. The locked bedroom door denies generation in ways that reveal the real anxiety motivating the ideology. The body that defines the gothic heroine's essential nature—that tie her to the emotions, sentimentality, blood, childbirth,

milk, Nature—that body has to be not only denied but also destroyed by the conclusion of the text. The mirror the father holds up to his daughter bespeaks her worst fears: she is flesh and therefore mortal; he is reason and spirit and therefore immortal. She desires nothing less than to become a man or at the very least a manly-woman.

If the first dream served as a *precis* for the first section of the novel, Adeline's second dream introduces her to the next section of the text's action. In this second dream she sees herself in a large old chamber of the abbey, long deserted and mysterious. Suddenly she hears a low voice calling her. When she attempts to find the source of the voice she sees a dying man, stretched on a bed, his face possessing "an expression of mildness and dignity." Suddenly his features convulse, and he grabs her hand:

she struggled in terror to disengage herself, and again looking on his face, saw a man, who appeared to be about thirty, with the same features, but in full health, and of a most benign countenance. He smiled tenderly upon her, and moved his lips, as if to speak, when the floor of the chamber suddenly opened, and he sunk from her view. The effort she made to save herself from following awoke her. (I, 239)

In this dream we can see charted the psychic movement away from the false father and to the true, lost, and dead father. His youth and attractive appearance are ambivalently undercut by his sinking from view just when he attempts to speak to his daughter. It is his doomed fate that draws the daughter to him; it is the pull of the death instinct, the thanotopic impulse that lures her to his side, a side that must be rejected if she is to survive where he did not.

Before Radcliffe gives us time to fully interpret this dream, however, we are presented with the third dream. In this one Adeline finds herself in winding passages of the abbey at dusk, unable

to find a door. She hears a bell toll, and then the confusion of distant voices. Lost and trapped, she suddenly sees a light and tries to follow it. It leads her to a man who looks as if he is trying to take her to a funeral. She is afraid to follow him, but he suddenly turns on her and begins to chase her. Her terror awakens her.

As if three dreams were not sufficient textual overload, Radcliffe quickly gives us a fourth, and Adeline returns to sleep as if to solve the mystery. In this final dream she follows the same mysterious man into a room hung with black wall hangings, prepared for a funeral. At the center of the room stands a coffin, and while she gazes at it she hears “a voice speak as if from within”:

The man she had before seen, soon after stood by the coffin, and lifting the pall, she saw beneath it a dead person, whom she thought to be the dying chevalier she had seen in her former dream: his features were sunk in death, but they were yet serene. While she looked at him a stream of blood gushed from his side, and descending to the floor, the whole chamber was overflowed; at the same time some words were uttered in the voice she heard before; but the horror of the scene so entirely overcame her, that she started and awoke. (I, 242)

These four dreams, strung together as a sort of crude nocturnal melodrama, reveal the history and fate of Adeline’s father, imprisoned in the abbey by his avaricious brother, the evil Marquis de Montalt, and then murdered by him and left to molder in a trunk. But there is also in this dream an element of sadistic voyeurism evidenced in the need of the daughter to see the father bloody and wounded and standing as victim in her stead. If the first dream positioned the daughter as the bloody victim, the fourth dream neatly reverses the power equation between the two. And once again castration imagery merges with a quasi-seduction scene, so that in some sense the daughter seems to be asking another version of the question she began to formulate, albeit in muted form, in

the first dream: like all primal fantasies, this one recurs to the myth of origins, so that the daughter is actually asking a simple and yet haunting series of questions: how has my father's death made my life possible? how have I fed on and consumed my father's energy? And note how very strange it is that the mother and the maternal body as the true source of origins are never mentioned by this very paternally-identified daughter.

Sent by fate to uncover and punish this horrible deed, Adeline has been taken to the one spot in the world where she can solve the crime of her father's murder. And not only does she have the moral force of justice and the inexorable laws of fate on her side, she also has the residue of her psychic wounds—her dreams—to lead her to the murderer. She may sleep no more that night, but do not think the female gothic heroine is not up to the task of decoding her dreams and solving the mystery of her father's murder and her own disinheritance. Notice, however, how the stock beating fantasy, I am being beaten by my father, is transformed here in a most peculiar manner: my father is being beaten by my uncle.

Adeline's dying father, his side pierced and bleeding, functions here as a Christ-like figure who leads her on to uncover the truth and unmask and punish evil. The dying father as Christ-figure, weak, wounded, ritualistically sacrificed so that his true heir—the meek gothic daughter—can inherit the earth, this cultural construct is a potent one because it speaks to the female reader's sense of self-importance, her self-divinization. If Christianity was to survive as a cultural force into the modern era it was because it was feminized, the Christian Everyman now a young woman, a daughter seeking her identity in an increasingly godless universe. Christian melodrama intersects here with gothic trappings, and the result is intended to be irresistibly attractive to its female reading audience. Adeline as gothic heroine is both wounded and a voyeur of woundings, pursuer and pursued, active and passive in a way that reminds of Freud's comments

on the bisexual nature of hysterical fantasies. It is typical of hysterics, however, to engage in histrionic attacks for effect, so that frequently they will play out both masculine and feminine parts, mimicking both the subject and the object of mutilation and seduction. Adeline appears trapped in just such a scenario. As a hysteric, however, Adeline has no choice but either to slip deeper into a sort of paralyzing melancholy or act out the mystery of her origins and solve the crime. Because she is a gothic heroine, she acts.

If the four interlocking dreams are the dramatic highpoint of the first volume of the novel, the discovery of the rust-stained dagger, the actual murder weapon, and the “obliterated” manuscript form the crux of the mystery in the second volume. With the dreams we are in the very rudimentary realm of the unconscious mind; we are, in short, within the psyche and soul of the female gothic heroine. But as she is a heroine, her internal world is an exact replica of her external situation. Inner reality mirrors outer reality in a reciprocity that we know is only characteristic of the universe of moral allegory. With the dagger and the tattered manuscript we move to the level of proof, the material clues that allow Adeline to close in on her suspect, the Marquis. Note, however, how the dreams have already provided her with only the bare outlines of the murder: the who, what, where and how of the crime. All she needs to discover is the motive, and that is provided when she reads the manuscript, the written record of her father, kept in his own hand as he faced murder by his own brother. This device, the partial, fragmented manuscript, became after Radcliffe a stock gothic trope. In fact, the unearthed manuscript was such a stock convention that it was both ridiculed and valorized in several later gothic (or anti-gothic) novels.

When Adeline finally does manage to find a moment of privacy she repairs to her locked chamber and spends the dark and dreary nights there reading the mysterious manuscript. After one particularly ominous section of text, Adeline chances to glance up and see a mirror, but “she feared

to raise her looks towards it, lest some other face than her own should meet her eyes; other dreadful ideas and strange images of fantastic thought now crossed her mind. A hollow sigh seemed to pass near her. ‘Holy Virgin, protect me!’ cried she” (II, 52-53). Reading her father’s manuscript has produced just this dislocation of identity; the face she fears to see in the glass is, we suspect, the face of her father, the murder victim. Later gothic heroines will see their faces in the faces of others, and this mirroring is not for them a pleasant phenomenon (for instance, in *Mysteries of Udolpho* Emily St. Aubert thinks that she resembles the mysterious Sister Agnes, or Catherine II’s resemblance to her mother is considered uncanny and unnatural by Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*). Again, the rabid fear of childbirth and the rejection of motherhood—seen on some deep level as the loss of the pristine self in another—are evidenced here all too clearly. Fear of motherhood as a manifestation of the instability of identity and the assault on the boundaries of the self, however, is elided by Radcliffe when she has her heroine ironically invoke the “Holy Virgin,” the mother of Jesus. When the matriarch appears in female gothic texts she frequently surfaces in just such a contradictory manner: a mother who is paradoxically a virgin, or the buried mother of *A Sicilian Romance*, or the mother as nun living safely in a convent later in *The Italian*. Good mothers cannot be actively sexual in the female gothic universe, only bad mothers (like the stepmother in *Sicilian Romance* or the Marchesa in *The Italian*) exude sexuality and they suffer horrible deaths as a result of such unnatural desires. But shame and guilt also are clearly indicated in all of these scenarios of confused female identity. As Sandra Lee Bartky has pointed out, “a pedagogy of shame” suffuses patriarchal culture so that young girls are tutored in the dangers and corruption inherent in their own bodies. Not directly connected to specific actions, the experience of shame and guilt in relation to their bodies and sexuality stems from the female socialization process in which girls are taught “to internalize the gaze of a ‘hostile witness’ to our bodily being.”

With this textual background in mind let me segue briefly here into Freudian dream and fantasy theory and speculate that the dreams in this novel can be read as hysterical fantasy-formations in the sense that Freud defined hysteria: first, the hysteric suffers from a psychic trauma whose origin she does not know or has repressed, yet which has remained as a memory trace in her psyche. Freud calls these memories pathogenic and hysterical patients, he notes, suffer from incompletely abreacted physical traumas; they “suffer from reminiscences . . . they can not get free of the past, and for its sake they neglect what is real and immediate.” More recently, Leigh Gilmore has expanded on this notion, stating that “trauma is never exclusively personal; it always exists within complicated histories that combine harm and pleasure. . . . remembering trauma entails contextualizing it within history.”⁵ Similarly, Adeline suffers not from her own memories of past trauma, but from her father’s unresolved legacy of betrayal and murder. She, in a sense, stands in the stead of her dead father and relives his trauma in order to release him and her from the ghostly presence he has assumed in her fractured psyche. In other words, the patriarchy as a corrupt system of barter and exchange is the very nightmare from which the female gothic heroine seeks to escape.

Secondly, the gap in conscious knowledge between the trauma and the partial memory of it causes what Freud calls “hysterical conversion,” that is, the somatization of conflictual unconscious representations. According to Freud, “hysterical symptoms are nothing other than unconscious phantasies brought into view through ‘conversion.’”⁶ All of which is another way of saying that the body is compelled to act out its psychical overload either through excitation (tears, fits, or hallucinations) or inhibition (melancholy, paralysis, catatonic senselessness). The gap, then, between knowledge about the trauma and the ability to process it consciously constitutes the very origin of hysteria. And we can conclude that in some way the four dreams that are related in this text embody the conflation of that very gap between the trauma committed on the father’s body and

the consciousness or processing of the memory on the daughter's substituted psyche and its representation, the female gothic text.

But we can also read Adeline as a melancholic with Kristeva's work *Black Sun* in mind. For Kristeva, the melancholic mourns not a lost object but the failure to find an acceptable object for her sadness because she has not been able to separate from the mother. The psychic loss cannot be appropriately symbolized because it has never actually taken place. The melancholic, however, has one positive response to this psychic impasse; she possesses the capacity to turn the loss into a gain, as it were, through language or art in which absence and presence interact so that the control of signs in the pursuit of an ideal form substitutes for melancholic lament.⁷ Art and language heal melancholia through their endless capacity to put signifiers into interplay in a sort of *fort-da* game. This reeling back of the body of the wounded mother, read as the displaced matriarchy, and controlling the loss through telling the tale—modified and slightly revised—over and over again—constitutes the female gothic narrative tradition (if not most of the subjects of women's writings).

Finally, I want to consider Freud's theory of fantasy and daydream formation. In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud claims that a dream is not a fantasmagoria, but a text to be deciphered, and further he claims that it is in the very nature of sexuality to have a traumatic effect on the ego; therefore, he justifies the connection between sexuality, trauma, and defense. In both fantasies and dreams her majesty the Ego dominates and determines all actions and consequences. As Freud observes, "a happy person never phantasizes, only an unsatisfied one," while he further claims that fantasies are articulations of a lack, a loss of the psychic plenitude we experienced in childhood. Most fantasies center on scenarios of self-aggrandisement and are structured around a narrative in which the ego regains a protective house, loving parents, and autoerotic objects suitable for the dreamer's affectionate feelings. Freud was to resort to an explanation that he called "primal

phantasies of phylogenetic endowment” because here the individual touches not any personal experience but traces of a racial or primeval experience (actually similar to Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious). For Freud the three primal fantasies that recur in all individuals are what he called the narrative of the seduction of three children, the inflaming of sexual excitement by observing parental intercourse, and the threat of castration or rather castration itself. Freud claims that these phantasies—the primal fantasies of heritage, seduction, and castration—“were once real occurrences in the primeval times of the human family, and children in their phantasies are simply filling in the gaps in individual truth with prehistoric truth.”⁸ In Radcliffe’s novel the heroine actually revisits all of these primal fantasies: seduction (at least an attempt by the odious uncle), sexual difference (the anxiety that Adeline experiences when her beauty elicits jealousy from women or lust from men), castration (the courtroom trial at which the uncle is exposed and condemned), and the attempt to recreate a family of origins (the recovery of the dead father’s body). The discovery of her father’s dead body is also on some level an attempt to reconstruct her own birth, an extremely morbid replay of the primal scene. The author’s persistent recourse to fantasy-formations alerts us to the residual presence of trauma in the text. As the research on trauma makes clear, there is no final resolution or successful rationalization and incorporation of trauma. Its effects linger like scars on a body, like markings on a blank page.

If we apply these insights to Adeline's dream scenario we can recognize that she is fingering an archaic trauma, a need to solve the riddle of her own existence, to explore the issue of origins by asking questions like, who am I in relation to my heritage? what is the origin of my body's anatomy? what causes my drives, my desires, my fantasies? The female gothic novel tradition would appear to be constructed over the body of the bloody father and the absent mother, but only because the mediating consciousness is that of the alternately melancholic and

hysterical daughter. In articulating her fantasies, the female gothic heroine dreams textuality and textualizes her dreams. In doing so she reshapes her personal and historical trauma into a triumphant literary saga that asserts the woman's fictitious power to seize and control her origins, or rather, her fantasies of her origins.

III

But if Ann Radcliffe raised the female gothic to new heights of popularity and bourgeois respectability, Mary Shelley enshrined the genre through the publication of *Frankenstein* (1819), a novel so famous that people who have not read it believe that they know it very well. *Frankenstein* inaugurated Shelley's writing career, and the story of its composition is itself a brilliant example of how the creative process is a manifestation of trauma's intersection with fantasy. As that novel has been exhaustively analyzed, by me among hundreds of others, I turn instead to a work by Shelley that actually reveals the traumatic residue and fantastic resolution of her life almost as clearly. Written two years after *Frankenstein* and not published until 1959, *Mathilda* is one of those lost fictions that surfaces more than a century later and suggests new possibilities and openings for understanding a writer's career. A short novel about a father's incestuous love for his daughter, his suicide, and the daughter's decline into melancholia and early death, *Mathilda* was written out of intense ambivalence toward both Godwin and Percy by a young woman who had seen both her father and her husband disappoint her and three of her own young children die by the time she was 22. Like her mother's thinly veiled autobiographies, *Mary* and *Maria*, *Mathilda* reads all too much like Mary Shelley's own fantasy rewrite of her life: the dead but perfect mother, the absent but all-loving father willing to kill himself rather than hurt his beloved daughter, the bright but grieving daughter pursued by the handsome, rich, and famous young poet. *Mathilda* wills her own early death, but before that event occurs in the final pages of the novella, she depicts for her idealized

audience of one (the poet Woodville) her life and the history of her emotions. The young idealized heroine has had very little external life, very few events outside the claustrophobic confines of the idyllic bourgeois family. The only adventure of Mathilda's life is the discovery and brief recovery of her father, and that recovery, unfortunately, kills them both.

Mathilda can be read on several levels as a working out of Mary Shelley's own fantasy of the family romance turned nightmare. The worm at the core of Mary Shelley's version, however, consists of her own displaced and elided incestuous desires, concealed from her consciousness by the use of the characters in *Mathilda* as screen-memories, fictively blocking her from viewing her own parents as objects of desire. Her favorite childhood sport is to "form affections and intimacies with the aerial creations of my own brain" and to "cling to the memory of my parents; my mother I should never see, she was dead: but the idea of my unhappy, wandering father was the idol of my imagination." Gazing longingly at the miniature of her father, Mathilda amuses herself with the fantasy that "disguised like a boy I would seek my father through the world. My imagination hung upon the scene of recognition; his miniature, which I should continually wear exposed on my breast, would be the means and I imagined the moment to my mind a thousand and a thousand times." ⁹

Mathilda imagines herself searching for her father disguised as a boy, and we could say that such is the case because only boys have the freedom to travel, but we should also recognize here the desire of a girl to change her sex so that she will be more acceptable to the father. The use of the miniature as a talismanic identificatory tag suggests a rewriting of *The Italian* in interesting and ironic ways that reverberate throughout this text, for Ellena's miniature garnered her only a false father, producing yet another sadistic spin on the dystopian family romance. When Mathilda imagines her reunion with her father it occurs sometimes in a desert, sometimes in a populous city, sometimes at a ball, sometimes on a vessel. He always speaks first and always his words are

exactly the same: ““My daughter, I love thee!”” (159). The location—sometimes empty, sometimes crowded—suggests that the core of the incestuous fantasy for the child concerns numbers; that is, when she imagines the reunion she refigures it as a denial of the reality of encroaching others in what is for her essentially an idealized and exclusive dyadic relationship. For Mathilda, any competition for the father is fearful and needs to be eliminated. The father is allowed to reappear only when Mathilda is sixteen and at the height of her youthful beauty. With her mother safely dead and no siblings as rivals, Mathilda does not need to brook any competition. When her father magically appears in a forest to claim her, she is clad in a symbolically virginal white frock with a fetching tartan accent. *Mathilda* reads at this and other points as an embarrassingly personal seduction fantasy. We have here Mary Shelley’s attempt to rewrite her life as if her father had not remarried and had a favorite child named William.

After her father’s sudden return when Mathilda is sixteen, she puts her education to good use and immediately begins resorting to literary displacements in order to explain how she feels in relation to her father. These analogies are not particularly promising, for very quickly Mathilda compares herself to Oedipus, Psyche, and the Biblical David. The transformation in associations and mythic archetypes suggests that Mathilda sees herself alternately as male or female, sometimes victimizer and sometimes victim of forces beyond her control. All of these mythic characters, however, have two traits in common: they were all wounded and traumatized repeatedly and yet all used their special talents to do battle against a potent and threatening familial figure or figures. We can recall Freud’s query about the very core of surviving a deep psychic wound: is trauma to be understood as the direct and immediate brush with death or is trauma the experience of surviving that near-fatal disaster and yet to be forced to relive it repeatedly in dreams and painful memories? As Cathy Caruth has noted, “in the oscillation between the crisis of death and the crisis of life” we

get “a kind of double-telling,” a narrative that exists “between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). In Mathilda’s case she conceals the initial wound—the mother’s death and her own guilty survival—only to have that original lack, the primordial trauma reactivated when her father loves and then deserts her.

Styling herself as a heroine of melodrama, Mathilda cannot see herself except through the lenses of literary conventions or what we would recognize as fantasy formations. Sometimes she is a Greek mythological figure, sometimes a Biblical hero, sometimes a Renaissance ideal, but finally she is never simply herself. In fact, one is tempted to say that she has not developed a sense of self, a sense of separation from others that would allow her to approach her father as an equal. She can only be his inferior and his part-object, a cathectic reminder of his earlier passion for his dead wife. She exists, in other words, as the living embodiment of *his* wound, his loss of his wife. Because we read the text completely from Mathilda’s point of view it is easy to overlook the fact that the father is as wounded, if not more so, than his daughter. The narrative relates a doubled trauma, as if father and daughter were confronting each other in a dream and simultaneously asking, “Father/Daughter, don’t you see that I am burning?” When Mathilda finally forces the “truth” out of her father, she is really confronting less the horror of incest than the fact that she has never been real to him. He sees her as the living embodiment of an earlier and more fulfilling relationship. He does not see her, but then he never did. He has simply been too wounded, too caught in his own saga of loss to see her as anything other than the living residue of his dead wife.

The theories of Nicolas Abraham are relevant here, particularly his notion of the “phantom,” which he labels an “invention of the living” designed to objectify “the gap that the concealment of some part of a loved one’s life produced in us. The phantom is, therefore, also a metapsychological fact. Consequently, what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of

others.” Mathilda, therefore, would appear to be pursued by the phantom of her mother, but in actuality she is haunted by the gap in her very living father’s consciousness, his secret sexual dislocations. The case studies of Abraham have identified this syndrome and his description bears an uncanny resemblance to the metapsychological dynamics of Mathilda and her father:

Because the phantom is not related to the loss of a loved one, it cannot be considered the effect of unsuccessful mourning, as is the case of melancholics or of all those who carry a tomb within themselves. It is the children’s or descendants’ lot to objectify these buried tombs through diverse species of ghosts. What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others. The phantoms of folklore merely objectify a metaphor active within the unconscious: the burial of an unspeakable fact *within the loved one*. (his italics) ¹⁰

What is the unspeakable fact within the father? The text informs us that it is incestuous and perverse love of father for daughter, but I would suggest that hate is the actual subject of this novella. When Mathilda tries to uncover her father’s secret, she asks him: ““Am I the cause of your grief?”” (171), and he blurts out, ““Yes, you are the sole, the agonizing cause of all I suffer, of all I must suffer until I die. Now, beware! Be silent! Do not urge me to your destruction....beware!”” (172). The syntax here is revealing, for it suggests a blaming of the victim that pervades the consciousness of most female gothic works. Mathilda *causes* her own destruction, the father suggests, by being desirable.

When confronted with the truth of his ambivalence, the father initially concedes the truth, which we are meant to take as untruth: ““Yes, yes, I hate you! You are my bane, my poison, my disgust! Oh! No! . . . you are none of all these; you are my light, my only one, my life.—My daughter, I love you!”” (173). The text has moved inexorably to this moment of climax, this

confession of unnatural and incestuous passion. But the confession of love follows within a few breaths from an outburst of hatred. Mathilda's immediate response is to sink to the ground, "covering my face and almost dead with excess of sickness and fear: a cold perspiration covered my forehead and I shivered in every limb" (173). The nausea that attacks her here is repeated at the end of the text, as she waits to die from a self-induced fever. But the illness from which she truly suffers and has suffered throughout the novella, however, is hatred toward her father and guilt for that hatred. His early desertion and long absence are never forgiven. His eccentricity, his jealousy of the vague suitor, his "strangeness"—all of these are repeated or elided so consistently that we can only conclude that Mathilda hates her father and longs to escape with an idealized and phantom mother.

But recall Abraham's theory of the phantom yet once more. Children are haunted by the unresolved and secret sexual and psychic history of their parents in such a way that the children themselves come to embody the tombs that are enclosed within the psyches of their parents:

The phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious—for good reason. It passes—in a way yet to be determined—from the parent's unconscious into the child's....*The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other.* A surprising fact gradually emerges: the work of the phantom coincides in every respect with Freud's description of the death instinct....the phantom is sustained by secreted words, invisible gnomes whose aim is to wreak havoc, from within the unconscious, in the coherence of logical progression. Finally, it gives rise to endless repetition and, more often than not, eludes rationalization. (his italics; 291)

If anyone is in the grip of the death instinct it would appear to be Mathilda, who ends up recapitulating her father's drive toward self-extinction. And note the repetition-compulsion evidenced in the continual use of literary allusions to distance herself from the pain of actual life. Do either Mathilda or her father understand the psychic abyss into which they have fallen? It would seem that neither is able to rationalize the dilemma and so both continue to sink. But while protesting to love her father still with a pure heart, Mathilda is suddenly placed in a most gothic situation that very night. Much past midnight she hears her father's footsteps approach her bedroom, pause at her door, and then, after a few moments, retreat. This gothic leitmotif, the heroine besieged in her own bedroom on a dark and stormy night by a potential rapist, precipitates the most anxious emotions in Mathilda:

That he should be restless I understood; that he should wander as an unlaidd ghost and find no quiet from the burning hell that consumed his heart. But why approach my chamber? Was not that sacred? I felt almost ready to faint while he had stood there, but I had not betrayed my wakefulness by the slightest motion, although I had heard my own heart beat with violent fear. (175)

This nocturnal visit causes Mathilda to have a particularly unpleasant dream or rather nightmare about her father. Like most dreams in gothic texts, this one is an overdetermined warning and foreshadowing of what lies in the future for the heroine. It is also, like the dreams of Adeline in *The Romance of the Forest*, a repetitious reenactment of trauma. Freud emphasizes that there is a complicated relation between trauma and survival precisely because of the indirect nature of psychic woundings. What causes trauma, according to Freud, is a sudden shock that actually acts very much like a bodily, physical threat but is instead a rupture in the psyche's experience of time: "We may, I think, tentatively venture to regard the common traumatic neurosis as a consequence of an

extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli....And we still attribute importance to the element of fright. It is caused by lack of any preparedness for anxiety” (*SE* 18: 31). Shortly after this passage, Freud points out that it is in dreams that we attempt to compensate for having directly missed the traumatic event. As Caruth points out,

The return of the traumatic experience in the dream is not the signal of the direct experience but, rather, of the attempt to overcome the fact that it was *not* direct, to attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place. Not having truly known the threat of death in the past, the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again. For consciousness, then, the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one’s own life. (her italics; 62)

In her ominously foreshadowing dream Mathilda finds her father “deadly pale, and clothed in flowing garments of white. Suddenly he started up and fled from me.” The chase ensues, with Mathilda vaguely aware that her father means to kill himself unless she can rescue him first. Just as she reaches him and catches a part of his robe, he leaps to his death off a cliff. Recall that Mathilda first met her father in a wood clothed in a flowing white garment, and notice now that the power-dynamic between them has shifted. Now it is the father who is dressed in white, less a virgin than a sacrificial victim. Now it is in the daughter’s hands to give life and happiness, not the father’s. The apprehension and resentment that the child feels at her powerlessness to win and keep the father’s affections has turned into the opposite emotion. Now it is the child who can doom the father with her rejection of him. There is guilt and sorrow in the dream, but ultimately there is also anger and revenge: a wish-fulfillment that appears to say, “Daddy, don’t you see that

you are dying.” The wages of the father’s earlier desertion of the child are death now by that child’s very hands.

The dream stands clearly as a wish-fulfillment, a castration fantasy, and the very next day the dream will be enacted with the expected fatal consequences. When Mathilda awakes the next morning she learns that her father has fled the estate, leaving behind a maudlin and self-justifying letter. After writing his letter, Mathilda’s father promptly leaves and dutifully walks off the very cliff Mathilda had foreseen in her dream. His death-march to the sea is punctuated by a lightning flash that rends an oak, a bell that sounds like a death knell, all of the very gothic props that had occurred in Mathilda’s dream of the night before. Following her father just too late to save him, she finally locates his dead body in a cottage near the sea: “the bed within instantly caught my eyes, something stiff and straight lay on it, covered by a sheet; the cottagers looked aghast” (184). The father has become that which he spent his life fleeing: an object on a bed, stiff, straight, the subject of shock and disgust for innocent onlookers. In short, the father has become a phallic spectacle. Mathilda can only collapse on the side of the bed, having escaped the bed, having escaped the fate of her mother. A fear and loathing of the body is evidenced here, both in the father and in Mathilda. The bed of life is also the bed of death, and it is a lucky child who is born and not consumed by her parents in the process of life.

And so I would claim that the need to write arises out of the gap between the experience of a trauma and our ability to work through and out of it. By writing a literary text we transform the trauma, but we never process it to the point that the trauma can or ever will disappear. The residue of trauma as the origin of a literary work persists in repeated imagery patterns that we begin to recognize as excessive, obsessive, delusional, hyperbolic, indeed, hysterical. Julia Kristeva, in fact, has accused most women’s novels of exhibiting “purposely perverse hysteria,”

while Mary Jacobus talks about “hysterical texts” like Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* as almost paradigmatic expressions of women’s creativity.¹¹ Mathila and Adeline, like their creators, appear to swing between excessive emotional overload and catatonic melancholia. The narrative oscillations in both texts can be explained largely through the struggle to act out the trauma and at the same time to futilely attempt to understand or rationalize the memories of the pain.

The contemporary critic Stephen Weismann has coined the term “the Loss-Restitution Hypothesis of Creativity” to explain this phenomenon. According to Weismann, the creative person is “a loss-sensitive, separation-prone individual, both by temperament and as a result of early trauma(s).” In order to compensate for these losses, the artist develops whatever verbal, musical or visual abilities she has as a “compensatory defense against loss and separation.” As this individual develops into adulthood, she uses these talents as learned coping mechanisms and as a mode of identity formation. For Weismann, therefore, “art is a disguised form of nostalgically autobiographical remembering whose commemorative powers seek to defy nature’s inevitable forces of death, decay, and loss.” By creating a permanent object, the artist “defends against depression while the creative product itself represents a symbolic denial of loss.” But as Weismann notes, no amount of creativity can ever fill the void—the lack—that is at the core of the wounded psyche. Hence the artist creates the way an addict seeks out the drug of choice. In a strikingly similar vein and more recently, Suzette Henke has presented a convincing case for what she calls the healing power of narrative or “scriptotherapy,” another version of transforming traumas into written fantasies that I have examined here.¹²

The questions that this essay attempts to frame at the beginning of the volume are: can creativity be understood simply as personal or is it always implicated in larger cultural, social, historical factors? Or is creativity a manifestation of fantasy as a coping mechanism, a means by

which we reshape trauma in order to master the wounds inflicted on us by our own past histories? Or is creativity a quality that transcends the individual psyche and its scars, in fact, the very quality that allows us to reimagine ourselves in fantasized triumphant postures? The Hispanic theorist Gloria Anzaldua has argued that one of the by-products of being a woman in a patriarchy is social and cultural alienation, and that one of the consequences of being “pushed out of the tribe” is the development of a heightened artistic sense or the drive to create cosmos out of chaos. Anzaldua calls this affective feature *la facultad*, and describes it as a sort of extra-sensory perception that develops in those who have been wounded by, traumatized, or rejected by their cultures: “living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create.”¹³ The particular texts examined in this essay—but any texts could be chosen if our hypothesis is correct—are suffused with predictable psychic strategies so that the reader can only participate as a sort of voyeur at very private dilemmas made public. But then I would claim that literature is made of just such material and although it is uncomfortable perhaps to recognize the wound as well as the fantastic shapes it assumes to conceal itself, ultimately we have no choice but to read them.

NOTES

- ¹ Richard Wright, “On Literature,” p. 6 of unpublished mss in Wright Archive, Beinecke Library, Yale University; qtd. Claudia Tate, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* (New York: Oxford U P, 1998), 93; Georges Braques, *The Notebooks of Georges Braques, 1917-1947* (Paris; Editions Maeght, 1947); rpt. *The Day and the Night* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952); D. H. Lawrence, *Letters, 1913-1916*, ed. George Zytaruk and James Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1981), 90.

- 2 Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca: Cornell U Press, 1981), p. 180.
- 3 Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and Aesthetics* (Manchester: Manchester U P, 1992), 28; Lawrence Kirmayer, "Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation," in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*. Eds. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (New York: Routledge, 1996), 175.
- 4 All quotations from the novel are from Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest* (New York: Arno, 1974).
- 5 Sandra Lee Bartky, "The Pedagogy of Shame," in *Feminisms and Pedagogies of Everyday Life*. Ed. Carmen Luke (Albany: State U of New York P, 1996), 225. Sigmund Freud, "Hysterical Fantasies and Their Relation to Bisexuality," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud [SE]*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 9:160; Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1991), 31.
- 6 My discussion of Freud's theories of fantasy is drawn from the analysis by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin et al. (London: Methuen, 1986), while my discussion of Freud's theories of hysteria is indebted to Elizabeth Bronfen, "Hysteria, Phantasy and the Family Romance," *Women's Writing* 1 (1994), 171-79.
- 7 See Julia Kristeva's discussion of hysteria in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia U P, 1989).
- 8 My discussion of Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud [SE]*, 24 vols. Trans. James Strachey

(London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74) is indebted to its analysis in Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1996), p. 4.

- 9 All quotations from the novella are from Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Penguin, 1992), 159, with page numbers in parentheses in the text.
- 10 Nicholas Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology," trans. Nicholas Rand, *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1987), 289.
- 11 Julia Kristeva's discussion of hysteria is developed at greater length in my *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1998), p. 13. Also see Mary Jacobus, *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Columbia U P, 1986).
- 12 Stephen Weismann, "Loss-Restitution Hypothesis of Creativity," *Psychoanalytical Quarterly* 55 (1986), 191-93; Suzette Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). Other recent feminist attempts to argue for culture's role in the female subject's ability to transform trauma into some sort of meaningful construct can be found in Deborah Horvitz's *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2000), and Laurie Vickroy's *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2002).
- 13 Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestisa* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 73.